

The Nazi in the 7th Grade

by Elizabeth Granillo

"I don't sit next to kikes or niggers," the apple-cheeked 11-year-old informed me the first day of class.

Her statement was so unexpected that I stood gaping at her in stunned horror until Johnny Soo chimed in matter-of-factly, "No Chinese or Mexicans, either, Mrs. Granillo. Her mom don't like 'em."

It didn't seem to bother Johnny much. He simply scooted past her and found a seat between his two girlfriends, Yolanda and Lauren.

"What's your name?" I asked the little racist.

"Janine Murphy."

"Well, Janine, you may sit wherever you like, but you mustn't use that kind of language. We may all be of different ethnic backgrounds in this class, but we all respect each other."

Her sneer was so pronounced it was a near grimace. She rolled her eyes, shrugged, and sauntered down the aisle to sit in the back of the room. No one sat beside her.

She was, I came to learn that first week, the class outcast, by her own choice, refusing to associate with any, but a select few of her classmates, calling the rest (to their faces) "niggers, gooks, benners, kikes" and "white trash." What astonished me was the fact that her racist insults didn't seem to have much effect on the recipients of her abuse. The other children generally ignored her, and almost never took issue with her remarks.

"I won't work in a group with Fernando," she announced one morning. "Mexicans steal."

Hot blood pumped into my face and I could feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up, but Fernando said indifferently, "Oh, that's just Janine. She doesn't know any better. Her parents are in the KKK."

Later that day, I arranged for Janine and myself to meet with Mr. Wiener, the school principal. Mr. Wiener had been a middle school principal for 15 years, and it took more than an adolescent bigot to get his shorts in a knot. "We talked about this last year, Janine," he said tiredly as the three of us sat together in his stuffy office. "You will not stay at this school if you continue to use racial slurs toward others."

She had her answer ready, memorized for just such an occasion. "I'm a proud member of the white race —"

"Janine, your boundless enthusiasm at being Caucasian is clear to everyone at this school. Your thoughts and beliefs are your own business, but I will not subject the other students to bigotry or unkindness from you or anyone else. I wouldn't allow anyone to insult you because of your race, and I will not permit you to insult others."

She rolled her eyes, huffed and sighed in exasperated contempt, but eventually we all signed a little contract together. Janine and I embarked upon what was to be a memorable year for the both of us.

If anyone had ever told me I was prejudiced, I would have laughed out loud, but this year—prompted by an 11-year-old white supremacist—my own bigotry slapped me right in the face. I hated to admit it, but it was true—I couldn't stand Janine Murphy. At times, I despised her as hotly and irrationally as she despised "those darker races."

"I try to like her but she can be so awful," I said to my husband over dinner. "For her essay on 'Someone I Admire' she chose Adolph Hitler. I said, 'Janine, what is there about Hitler you could find to admire? He caused the deaths of millions of people.' And she said, 'No, he didn't. The Jews just made that up because they want the world to feel sorry for them.' Can you believe that? How do you get through to a child like that?"

"You can't reason with unreasonable people," my husband answered sensibly. "And as horrible as her beliefs may be to us, you have no business trying to teach her that her parents are wrong. Your job is to teach her tolerance and love through your example. And," he added, trying to suppress a grin, "to love her the way you love your other students."

Though infuriated by his cool common-sense approach, I knew he was right. My job was to teach Janine English and History, to help her "fit in," and to accept her myself. Her fellow students didn't seem offended by her remarks nearly as much as I was. I was the one with the problem.

I decided to make a great effort, not only to establish Janine as an accepted member of the class, but to like her. It wasn't easy.

Her characteristic sneer and habit of rolling her eyes in disgust were very hard to ignore, but I steeled myself to the task. I worked diligently to find at least one redeeming quality in Janine each day.

"Janine, you were one of the top spellers this week. I'm very impressed!"

"Class, you'll notice that Luis, Antoinette, and Janine were the first people to get to work on their book reports. They get extra tickets in the candy jar!"

"I need some of our most talented class artists to help me draw a map on the board—Li Chiu, Janine, Fernando?"

At first she simply sneered at my endeavors, her upper lip curled back in exaggerated disdain, but after a few slow weeks I began to see a change. She was working harder, turning in work more quickly, and waiting for me to recognize her efforts. One day during a noisy and chaotic group-work session, I said to her in passing, "When you have your hair pulled back in a bow like that I can see how beautiful your eyes are," and she looked up at me in open-mouthed amazement.

At the time, I didn't give it a second thought; I'm always complimenting my students. Adolescents need personal recognition and encouragement, and my students were used to hearing this from me. But as I passed on through the rowdy classroom, I heard Janine ask Louisa, "Can I see your pocket mirror?" and she spent several minutes examining her eyes with critical interest.



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She wore her hair pulled up in a pony tail for the rest of the year.

Janine began to wait for me after class and would often help me tidy up the classroom while telling me about her dog Benito, and her baby sister Angela. Her casual, offhand bigotry was still hard to take, but she wanted so much to be liked that it gradually became a little easier to be kind to her.

But there was a surprise in store for me. One hot afternoon as I walked up and down the rows of seats, fanning myself and looking over the students' shoulders at their essays, I spoke impatiently to a giggling group of boys who had not even begun to write. "Gentlemen, those essays are due today, not next year. Get started."

"Were *we* supposed to be writing?" Miguel Jimenez grinned at me insolently, secure in his belief that his teacher (like all females) adored him. "I didn't hear no instructions. You gotta talk louder. Or else say 'Mister Miguel Jimenez' when you talk to me. Then maybe I'll hear you."

I quipped back at him in Spanish. After a stunned moment of disbelief, he spluttered, "I didn't know you could speak Spanish. Geez—that's sneaky!"

I grinned back at him. "What kind of name did you think 'Granillo' was—Chinese?"

"I thought—," said a small voice from the back of the room. I turned to look at Janine, who was suddenly white-faced. "I thought it was...an Italian name," she said.

It had never occurred to me that she would make such an assumption. "No, Janine," I said gently. "It's an old Spanish name."

She looked away from me then, deliberately turned her face away.

"Too bad for you, Mrs. G!" Jose snorted. "You're on the nigger list now with the rest of us."

"Watch your language, Jose," I said sharply, then waved everyone back to their assignments. "C'mon, c'mon! Enough goofing around—get back to work! Antonio, don't just sit there grinning at me. You need a pencil? What do I look like—the student store?"

The next day Janine was more withdrawn than usual. She was sullen and unresponsive during class, and when the bell rang she took the long way around to the door, avoiding my desk. I hesitated, then called out to her, "Janine, you said you had some poems to show me. I'm looking forward to reading them."

She stopped, stood absolutely still, and stared at me for an uncomfortably long time. It was both heartbreaking and unnerving watching that terrible inner struggle. Finally she said, "I'll bring them tomorrow," and hurried out the room.

We spent two hours together the next afternoon going over the poems she had written. There were 15, all passionate love poems, making up in innocent sweetness what they lacked in style.

I spent a lot of time looking at her face while she was reading the poems aloud. Not a pretty child, I thought, but sweet in appearance: soft, fluffy blonde hair, and clear blue eyes. It was the high flare of her nostrils and an unfortunately pronounced natural curl of her upper lip that gave the appearance of a scornful sneer.

As she read her childish poems, I realized that I liked her very much. And yet earlier the same day, when she stood up in class and read aloud her opinion that Negroes were directly descended from apes and therefore sub-human, I despised her so completely that I could hardly force myself to be civil as I cut her off, suggesting she instead share the excellent story about her dog she had written the week before. Hate the sin, not the sinner, I grumbled to myself over and over, as I continually forced a smile and found daily words of praise and encouragement for Janine. Indeed, we had a love-hate relationship.

The final day of school came quickly, and my last class was yelling good-bye and stampeding out the door. Janine lingered behind to help me take down the bulletin boards. "My family is moving to Missouri this summer," she told me. "I won't be here next year."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I was hoping you'd come around and visit me."

She hesitated. "You really like me, don't you?"

A strange feeling came over me. Recognizing that it was the last day I would see her, I found myself suddenly able to look past the ugly sneer—even past the ugly racism—to see the fragile child within. I said, "Of course I like you, Janine. How could I not?"

Suddenly she threw her arms around me and hugged me tightly. "Oh, Mrs. Granillo! I just love you!" she cried out. "I wish with all my heart that you were a member of the pure white race! I wish you were my mom!"

Nothing else she could have said could have hurt me more deeply, and yet at that moment, I finally understood Janine. "I wish I could have been your mom, too," I said truthfully.

When she left, both of us were in tears.

That was four years ago.

I never saw her again, but she did send me a Christmas card a year later. In it she wrote, "I never had a teacher who liked me as much as you did. I love you, Mrs. Granillo." She signed it, "Your friend forever, Janine," and decorated the page with a happy face and a swastika. •